

Pandemic Flu Planning Update (Status as of April 28, 2006)

In the last month the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department (LLCHD) has been engaged in more planning meetings, more presentations and more scheduled activities related to preparing for a potential pandemic flu. (Earlier planning information is not repeated here, but available on the web page.)

As a public health department one of our principal roles in pandemic flu preparation and planning is to provide all members of Lincoln and Lancaster County with accurate and timely information about a possible pandemic flu. The facts are as follows:

- Avian influenza (bird flu) is infecting both wild and domestic birds on at least three continents (Asia, Africa and Europe).
- In relatively small numbers (just over 200 at the moment) individuals in close contact with birds, have contracted avian influenza.
- Over half of the people who have been infected with the avian flu virus (H5N1) they got from birds, have died.
- There's a concern by scientists that the avian influenza virus will mutate into a form that is easily transmissible from person to person, thus producing the next pandemic (a worldwide epidemic of a new flu virus).
- While we can expect that there will be a pandemic in the future, no one knows when it may occur or how many people will get the disease and how sick they will be. Many people look at the effects of the Spanish Flu of 1918 to anticipate a worse-case scenario.
- If a new strain of flu strikes soon, there will be no vaccine available against the pandemic virus for 6 to 9 months.
- At the moment there is no pandemic flu.
- We must prepare and plan as a community and as individuals to reduce the potential disruptions caused by a pandemic flu.

The above summarizes the facts as we know them, and our first activity under our communication role is to make people aware of what a pandemic is and the burdens it could impose on our community. Staff members from the LLCHD are heavily engaged in this effort, and there's much more to be done before the vast majority of our local residents know the basics of pandemic flu. Businesses and agencies all across the County are also making plans and preparing for the worst, while hoping for the best.

The Department is certainly not alone in making people aware of pandemic flu as pandemic flu is a major topic of focus worldwide. Sometimes, though, the messages get garbled or misinterpreted. At the moment there's a great deal of media attention to pandemic flu, and hardly a day goes by without one or more news stories. All major channels report on any countries with recent cases of H5N1, either bird or human cases. CNN regularly reports on bird and pandemic flu on their Sunday morning broadcasts. NBC News had a feature on their April 23rd edition of Dateline, and there's a scheduled May 9th airing on ABC of a

made-for-TV movie called “Fatal Contact: Bird Flu in America.” (“Fatal Contact: Bird Flu in America” is a highly dramatized, fictional version of what some people speculate might occur if a pandemic flu outbreak develops—remember it is fiction, not fact.) Oprah Winfrey has devoted an entire show to discussion of pandemic flu. Bird flu even makes it to the financial news channels when the potential economic burdens posed by a pandemic are discussed or the quarterly financial results for the maker of Tamiflu are reported.

There are several web sites that regularly follow the latest situation related to pandemic flu. For those who seek more information we recommend the official government website on pandemic flu, which is www.pandemicflu.gov. There’s a link from our web page to the site.

Our communication role will change when there are cases of avian flu in the bird populations in North America, which is probable later this year. Should there be any U.S. human cases of avian flu (bird to human spread) even more information will be provided. Finally, the need to communicate will increase dramatically if any human case of a new human flu virus easily transmitted from person to person, thus a pandemic flu, is detected. A pandemic is by definition a new flu strain that no one is immune to leading to serious health consequences in persons who become infected—it is a worldwide epidemic. While we hope the next pandemic occurs in the distant future, the time to prepare is now.

Recent Presentations

Volunteer Partners sponsored a community presentation on April 4th directed at the general public, but especially aimed at volunteers. Some local planning information was shared with the audience after the “Flu 101” presentation (the layperson version of the Center for Biopreparedness Education’s presentation).

On April 17th, local community leaders, representatives from several of Nebraska’s local health departments and some staff members from LLCHD attended a session on state and local pandemic flu planning efforts. It was one of three panel discussions associated with the Department’s Annual Awards activities. Dr. Dan Noble, Deputy Director of the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, Mary Finley from the Omaha Public Power District (OPPD) and Rita Parris, Executive Director the Public Health Association of Nebraska (PHAN) joined Dr. Bruce Dart in presenting an overview of the possible effects of pandemic flu and what is being done to prepare for the next pandemic.

Another agency that asked for a basic primer on avian and pandemic flu was the Health and Safety Committees at the Lincoln Electric System (LES). Over the course of two days (April 18 and 19), and at four separate sessions, approximately 325 LES employees learned more about what influenza (flu) is and what problems a pandemic flu would impose on the community. Dr. Bruce Dart, Tim Timmons and Steve Frederick divided up the presentations. From the

feedback we know that the interest of LES employees is high and there may be more information that we can provide to LES employees in the future.

Businesses need to plan for a possible pandemic and the business community is a key partner in our efforts to minimize the potential adverse effects of a pandemic. On April 28th, the Assistant Director of the Department addressed the Small Business Group of the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce to discuss how businesses might prepare for a pandemic.

Note: The University of Nebraska Medical Center had a Mini-Medical School devoted to "Avian Flu: Ready or Not" that was broadcast statewide on April 13th and 20th. There was great attendance in Lincoln for the course.

Requests for presentations on pandemic flu continue to come in and staff members will try to accommodate such requests or arrange for others to meet the needs.

Pandemic Flu Committee Meetings

In addition to the presentations, meetings have been held with several of the committees we have engaged in our local pandemic flu planning. The medical sector group met on April 4th to discuss triage and infection control plans. A follow-up session of conference calls was held on April 13th to review the draft plans of the statewide infection control members of APIC (Association of Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology).

The LPS Pandemic Flu Committee met on April 10th and 24th and began reviewing school policies, and readying communication pieces for both staff and students and parents. The committee is meeting every other week until the close of school.

Future Events

- Dr. Bruce Dart, Director of the Health Department is on the agenda of meeting of the City-County Common on May 2nd, and it will be broadcast on Channel 5.
- The Mutual Aid Society meets May 15th at Panama Fire and Rescue, Panama, NE, to learn more about pandemic flu.
- On May 17th there's a presentation scheduled to representatives from the WorkWell companies.
- The Department has scheduled the first of several planned public forums on Saturday, June 3rd from 9:00 to 10:30 at the F Street Recreation Center, 1225 F Street. Please call 441-8093 if you plan to attend.

For more information on these events, or other information on avian and pandemic flu, visit our web page for updates, or call (402) 441-8053.